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The Lithuanian Case

PRESIDENT BUSH is proceeding very gingerly in his support of Lithuania and its right to choose its own future. Understatement can be useful in diplomacy, but beyond a certain point the message becomes inaudible. Mr. Bush was careful to say yesterday that he has reached no decision yet on his next steps. He is clearly trying to separate his support for Soviet internal reforms and his encouragement of Soviet arms reductions from any condemnation of the Soviets in the Lithuanian case.

He went on to explain that he's anxious not to do anything that "compels the Soviet Union to take action that would set back the whole case of freedom around the world." That's where he gets into trouble. "Compels" is an odd word to have used, implying as it does that the Soviets would have no choice, implying even that they would be justified in their action. Surely what the president meant was that the Soviets might be tempted to act or to use stern action by him as a justification. It's important not to get caught in the trap of tolerating the Soviet squeeze on Lithuania out of fear that protests might induce the Soviets to do worse. And it is also important not to go on and on about the limitations we feel on our ability to act and how anything we do might have a terrible impact and so forth. It's one thing to accept reality and recognize those limitations on what we might do and the complicated nature of our interests in Eastern Europe. But it's

another to wax endlessly on how circumscribed we are. A little more reticence on this point would help.

The administration is considering economic retaliation against the Soviets for their embargo of their oil and gas to Lithuania. But for the present, Mr. Bush says, he is continuing to try to encourage negotiations between the Soviets and the Lithuanians. Negotiations—if they are true negotiations—are desirable, and he is right to press and press hard on this point.

Lithuania sets a towering precedent for the Soviets in dealing with all of their restive minorities and outlying republics. That's the dilemma that faces President Gorbachev: he knows that whatever happens in Lithuania, he's got to be prepared to apply the same rule to all the others who are now talking about independence—not only the other Balts but the Georgians and the Ukrainians and the rest. Forcible repression means a march back to Stalinism and farewell to any hopes for economic reform. But independence for Lithuania leads in the direction of dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The immediate issue is the degree of coercion that the Soviets are applying to the process. By bringing the entire republic of Lithuania to a halt, the Soviets are creating a degree of crisis that will generate something other than a cool atmosphere for long talks. The danger in the United States' muted response so far is that it is susceptible to being misinterpreted as acquiescence, encouraging the Soviets to go farther.